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RELIGIOUS AND OTHER ECSTASIES

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In the psychology of religion adequate conclusions cannot be reached unless, making full use of the comparative method, phenomena that are alike, whether they appear within or outside of religion, are studied together.

We propose in this paper to establish whatever relation can legitimately be established between religious and non-religious ecstasy. Beginning with instances generally regarded as purely physiological in their origin, i.e., independent of any belief or other conscious factor, we shall end with a religious ecstasy.

The main manifestation of that dread disease, epilepsy, is often preceded by curious signs, varying greatly from person to person, but fairly constant in the same person. In some instances, the "aura," as these premonitory symptoms are called, is in the nature of an ecstasy. In *Modern Medicine* Dr. Spratling reports the case of a priest under his care whose epileptic attacks were preceded by a rapturous moment. Walking, for instance, along the streets he would suddenly feel, as it were, "transported to heaven." This state of marvelous enjoyment would soon pass, and a little later on he would find himself seated on the curb of the sidewalk aware that he had suffered an epileptic attack.¹ The same author mentions elsewhere two other epileptic patients, "teachers of noted ability," who speak of their aura as "the most overwhelming ecstatic state it is possible for the human to conceive of."²

¹ W. P. Spratling, art. "Epilepsy" in Osler's *Modern Medicine*, Vol. VII.

² *Epilepsy and Its Treatment*, p. 466.

Similarly, the Russian novelist Dostoevsky enjoyed, before his epileptic attacks, a moment of supreme elation:

There are seconds—they come five or six at a time—when you suddenly feel the presence of the eternal harmony. It is something not earthly—I do not mean in the sense that it is heavenly—but in the sense that man cannot endure it in his earthly aspect. This feeling is clear and unmistakable. It is as though you apprehend all nature and suddenly say, “Yes! it’s right, it’s good.” It is not that you love—oh, there is something in it higher than love—what’s most awful is that it is terribly clear, and such joy!¹

There is in *The Idiot* a similar description:

I remember among other things a phenomenon which used to precede his epileptic attacks, when they came in the waking state. In the midst of the dejection, the mental marasmus, the anxiety, which the madman experienced, there were moments in which all of a sudden the brain became inflamed and all his vital forces suddenly rose to a prodigious degree of intensity. The sensation of life, of conscious existence, was multiplied tenfold in these swiftly passing moments. A strange light illumined his heart and mind. All agitation was calmed, all doubt and perplexity resolved themselves into a superior harmony, but these radiant moments were only a prelude to the last instant—that immediately preceding the attack. That instant, in truth, was ineffable.²

The epileptic aura is a phenomenon well known to medical students. The following information, taken from Spratling’s works, is valuable for our purpose:

The most common psychic aura is a sudden acceleration of the imagination, a quick overflowing of the process of thought in which “the train of imagery is urged ahead with trembling, excited haste until the thread is snapped and unconsciousness occurs.”

Sudden blindness may constitute the most substantial part of the aura.

Auditory auras usually partake of the character of roaring and voices, the sound of the waves, etc. Such aura occurs in from two to three per cent of all cases.³

¹ *The Possessed* (Besi), tr. by C. Garnett (New York: Macmillan).

² *The Idiot*, I, 296.

³ The last quotation is from *Three Lectures on Epilepsy* by W. A. Turner (Edinburgh, 1910), p. 6.

Hallucinations of taste and smell occur also. The reappearance of normal consciousness is frequently marked by temporary mental confusion, during which phase automatisms or semipurposive actions may take place.

The preceding instances of epileptic auras show the following features: (1) the total absence of a causal conscious factor: a purely physiological cause is assigned; (2) the aura comes suddenly and unexpectedly; the subject's rôle is therefore an entirely passive one; it is as if an external power had taken possession of him; (3) it brings with it a "sense" of illumination, of revelation; (4) the experience is at times so wonderful that the most extravagant descriptive terms and comparisons seem to the subjects to fall short of the reality; it is an ineffable experience.

These traits might naturally enough suggest superhuman causation. Yet, no metaphysical significance is ascribed to them. The priest did not think himself actually transported to heaven; neither did he believe that he had communed with God. Both the priest and Dostoevsky accept the scientific view: these raptures are the expression of a particular organic disease; and so, the latter says, "it is not a higher life, but, on the contrary, one of lower order."¹

In *Les Obsessions et la Psychasthénie* by Janet are found instances very similar to the preceding and yet not apparently connected with epilepsy. In them some conscious activity, sometimes regarded as the sufficient cause, precedes the ecstasy. In fact, however, the conscious activity (perception, idea, etc.) plays rather the rôle of an occasion, as, for instance, of a spark that explodes a train of powder.

Fy, while walking in the country, is intoxicated by the open air, "everything seems delightful"; it seems to her that she is going "to burst from happiness." She declares:

I have never before experienced that; the day passes like a dream; time passes five times more swiftly than in Paris. I feel a better person,

¹ *The Idiot*.

and it seems to me that there are no bad people, every face is sympathetic and it seems to me that I live in the Golden Age.¹

Gs., contemplating Paris from the top of the Trocadero, is roused to intense admiration, and for a moment he forgets his suffering. He says:

It seems to me that it is too beautiful, too grand, that I am lifted up above myself. At the time, it gives me an enormous pleasure; but it exhausts me, my legs shake, and it seems to me that, unable to stand that happiness, I am going to swoon.²

But, however vivifying and inspiring a beautiful day in the country or Paris from the Trocadero may be, these sights do not usually liberate storms of feeling such as are described by these two persons. The country and Paris acted upon them like a last drop that starts an overflow. Quite similar are the two following instances, taken from my own documents.

A young woman passed, on divers occasions, through moments of sudden and extreme happiness. In one instance it was when recovering from illness; in another, she was "in a beautiful place in the Catskill Mountains, walking or sitting alone." Suddenly, she found herself "uplifted" by an "overwhelming sensation of the bigness of things." She felt a desire to pray. But these words are, in her opinion, quite inadequate to describe her experience.³

Another woman writes:

Once when walking in the wild woods and in the country, in the morning under the blue sky, the sun before me, the breeze blowing from the sea, and the birds and flowers around me, an exhilaration came to me that was heavenly—a raising of the spirit and nature within me through perfect joy. Only once in my life have I had such an experience of heaven.⁴

The case of Nadia is not essentially different, for, although two powerful emotional stimuli, love and music, provide rational causes, common sense will not in this instance regard

¹ Pierre Janet, *Les Obsessions et la Psychasthénie* (Paris, 1903), I, 380-81.

² *Ibid.*, p. 380.

³ No. 125.

⁴ No. 40.

them as causes commensurate with the intensity of the storm they let loose. The love itself has hardly any rational basis, for Nadia has never spoken to the man and has seen him but a few times. She wrote to Pierre Janet, her physician:

The concerts given by X have been for me a revelation; they have awakened such an enthusiasm in me that I have never recovered from it. I cannot explain its effect. When I left the hall after the first concert, my legs and whole body shook so that I could not walk, and I spent the night in tears. . . . But it was not painful, far otherwise; it was as if I was coming out of a dream which filled my past life. I understood things more as they really are. I was in a veritable heaven of happiness. My only hope during many years has been to hear him again and to experience the same feelings. I believe that, as people said, I had a passion for him, but it was not an ordinary passion; of that I am sure. He seemed to possess a supernatural influence over me.¹

Nadia reminds one of love at first sight. Is not the *coup de foudre de l'amour*, as the French say, a phenomenon in several respects similar to the one we are discussing? The passive rôle of the subject, the suddenness of the emotional onslaught, the ineffable happiness establish a resemblance more than superficial. But space does not permit of a more detailed comparison.

Jean occasionally experiences what he calls *sensations sublimes et solennelles*. This happens, for instance, when he thinks of himself as a representative in the Chamber of Deputies, and when, before well-filled galleries, he pronounces a great political speech. A slight shudder runs through his body—not an unpleasant shudder—: his heart is calm and beats slowly . . . ; instead of his habitual humble tread, with head down, he straightens up, and strides along with an important air. His intelligence is exalted and keen, and he thirsts for knowledge; above all, he enjoys a sense of happiness never otherwise felt. “They are,” he says, “divine impressions that prove to me the existence of a soul in the body.”²

The appellation “divine” applied by Jean to his emotion and the illogical sequence of ideas by which he comes to the belief in the existence of a soul in the body are well worth

¹ P. Janet, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

² *Ibid.*, p. 381.

noticing; the same sort of reasoning is common enough among persons cherishing high intellectual pretensions.

Few, if any, persons will fail to recognize in their own experiences moments of exaltation comparable to the foregoing, both in their quality and in their occasion. We are in the habit of regarding these moments as determined by some mental content, but the noteworthy thing is that they are, in principle, no more rationally caused than Jean's ecstasy or the raptures of No. 125. Did Jean actually pronounce mentally a noble discourse? Did he develop a succession of great thoughts supported by vast erudition, set forth with powerful logic? Certainly not. He simply pictured himself speaking in the impressive setting of the Chamber of Deputies. He did not actually say anything, or the things which he said mentally were mere shadowy fragments of commonplace stump-speech oratory. But he heard the applause from the galleries, and he straightened up, and he felt a shiver course down his spine, and he thought himself convincing and witty.¹

These last cases are, then, instances of the presence of an internal, organic store of energy ready to be set off at a slight provocation. Paris from the top of the Trocadero, a sun-lit landscape, a strain of music, an imaginary speech in the Chamber, were, in each particular case, equally efficient fuses. Every normal emotional experience (but not only those) is dependent upon these two factors: a stimulus in the form of a perception or other mental process and an organic disposition set into activity by the stimulus. Each particular instance differs from every other in respect to the share of these two determining factors. In abnormal instances there may be no conscious stimulus. That is the case in the epileptic aura; the emotional explosion is, as it were, self-started.

The trait of religious mystical ecstasy which has been most insisted upon in the literature of the subject—a trait

¹ This is a delusion due to causes similar to those that determine the illusory sense of power in a partly intoxicated person.

without which, according to the Roman Catholic church, no ecstasy is a true religious ecstasy—is its “noetic quality,” as the philosophers call it; the mystics themselves speak of “revelation” or of “illumination.” A careful examination places beyond doubt the revelatory character of every one of the preceding instances. Nadia alone uses the term “revelation,” but all of them convey in no mistakable terms the unique, wonderful quality of their experiences. They seem to them not only different from, but another sort of thing than, anything they have so far known. Both Nadia and Jean speak of a new understanding of things; and Dostoevsky, struggling to describe the undescribable, notes two aspects of revelation upon which the Christian mystics usually lay stress, its clearness and its certitude.

It might be said, by way of objection, that what we refer to in these instances as “revelation” is too lacking in conceptual clearness to deserve that name. But is it not well known that lack of conceptual definiteness has never been regarded by the mystics, or their apologists, as a sufficient reason for disbelieving in the revelatory quality of the mystical experience? It is sufficient for the present purpose to remark that objection on the ground of vagueness applies equally to a great many other instances of ecstatic “revelation,” both religious and otherwise.

Why is it that although our instances possess all the essential traits of religious mystical ecstasy, namely, suddenness, ineffability, noetic quality (impression of illumination), and passivity, they are not regarded by the experiencers as due to God and are not classed as religious experiences? A sufficient reason has already been offered with reference to the ecstasies known to the experiencer to be part of an epileptic attack. As to the others, they did not take place under conditions favoring a religious interpretation. The more common of these conditions is an antecedent belief in the divine origin of ecstasy; or, at least, in a God who can manifest himself in man. When

to that belief is added a desire or an expectation of entering into blessed relation with God, the probability of a divine interpretation being put upon ecstasy is very greatly increased. This general and inadequate statement must not be interpreted as implying the impossibility of an ecstatic experience becoming itself the ground of belief in a God-Providence.

We pass now to an instance of ecstasy regarded both by the experiencer and the world in general as religious.

M. E. is a man of superior education and of great moral earnestness. Throughout his life he has wrestled with philosophico-religious problems. He is wont to see in life, at least in its more dramatic events, the hand of Providence. It will be observed in the account which follows that the ecstasy fell upon him with startling unexpectedness; as far as he knew, nothing whatsoever, whether in his physical or in his psychical condition, could have foreshadowed its appearance. In this respect his ecstasy did not differentiate itself from certain epileptic auras. Did it differentiate itself from them in any way other than the interpretation placed upon it and the natural consequence of that interpretation? It is for him a divinely caused experience. The effect of that belief was to lift up the ecstasy to the rank of an event of the highest spiritual importance.

As to ecstasies, I experienced one, among others, which I remember perfectly. I will try to tell you when and how it happened and what it was like. I was thirty-six years old. I was climbing with some young fellows from Forclaz to the Croix de Bovine in order to reach Champex. We were following a road bordered by blooming oleanders, and looking down over a stretch of country dotted here and there with clumps of firs. The wind scattered the clouds above and below us, sending them down or driving them up in whirling eddies. Now and then one escaped and floated over the valley of the Rhône. I was in perfect health; we were on our sixth day of tramping, and in good training. We had come the day before from Sixt to Trient by Buet. I felt neither fatigue, hunger, nor thirst, and my state of mind was equally healthy. I had had at Forclaz good news from home; I was subject to no anxiety,

either near or remote, for we had a good guide, and there was not a shadow of uncertainty about the road we should follow. I can best describe the condition in which I was by calling it a state of equilibrium. When all at once I experienced a feeling of being raised above myself, I felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and power were penetrating me altogether. The throb of emotion was so violent that I could barely tell the boys to pass on and not wait for me. I then sat down on a stone, unable to stand any longer, and my eyes overflowed with tears. I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in humility and poverty, leaving him, the Almighty God, to be judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted, and I was able to walk on, but very slowly, so strongly was I still possessed by the interior emotion. Besides, I had wept uninterruptedly for several minutes, my eyes were swollen, and I did not wish my companions to see me. The state of ecstasy may have lasted four or five minutes, although it seemed at the time to last much longer. My comrades waited for me ten minutes at the cross of Bovine, but I took about twenty-five or thirty minutes to join them, for, as well as I can remember, they said that I had kept them back for about half an hour. The impression had been so profound that in climbing slowly the slope I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied with no determinate localization. It was rather as if my personality had been transformed by the presence of a *spiritual being*. But the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.¹

¹ Th. Flournoy, *Observations de psychologie religieuse*, Obs. V, pp. 351-57 (abbreviated). The translation is by W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 67-68.

No wonder that this exquisite experience aroused in M. E. thankfulness toward the Giver of it and a wish to know what could be done in order to deserve this and other blessings. He "felt His reply." It was that he "should do His will from day to day." This thought, so obvious that it might have appeared in any mind with similar religious ideas, is taken as God's reply. This is the only revelation conveyed in a conceptual form. No one would insist upon its evidential value. But in the opinion of M. E. the power, the goodness, and probably other qualities of God, as well as ineffable aspects of the meaning of life, were also revealed: he "felt" them. One can readily understand how, as soon as God was regarded as the author of this brain storm, the mind of M. E. filled with the glorious meaning of "God"; whereupon the "miracle" glowed for him with the light that has gathered during centuries of worship around the Christian idea of God. It seems almost as if M. E. himself realized that he was interpreting his feelings and emotions; for he repeats "as if" several times: "It was rather *as if* my personality had been transformed by the power of a spirit."

The reader familiar with the writings of St. Paul has probably compared in his mind the great apostle's ecstatic experience with the preceding accounts. It possesses every essential characteristic belonging to the instances we have discussed, and no other: suddenness, surpassing delight, illumination, ineffability, passivity. In his second letter to the Corinthians, when he comes to the subject of "visions and revelations of the Lord," he relates how "fourteen years ago"—whether in the body or out of the body, he does not know—he was "caught up to the third heaven," and "heard unspeakable words which it is not possible for man to utter."¹

Whether or not we regard this experience as of an epileptic nature (as some do), this question demands an answer: Was there any way for St. Paul, ignorant as he was of modern

¹ II Cor. 12:1-4.

science, sharer in the belief common about him in divine and diabolical possession, and passionate disciple of the Lord Jesus risen from the dead and seen once already on the way to Damascus, to interpret the storm of feelings and emotions that suddenly assailed him otherwise than as a divine occurrence? This question must be answered, we think, in the negative.

The ecstatic quality of an epileptic aura may puzzle the lay mind. Why should a morbid physical process appear in consciousness as an "exalted" delight? As a matter of fact, it need not be so; the epileptic aura possesses at times a very different character. In theory—and the actual facts fulfil sufficiently the theoretical expectation—the aura may have any affective quality whatsoever. There are instances on record in which the face of the subject wears "a terrified expression." It may be added that a sense of well-being and joy is characteristic of morbid conditions other than the epileptic aura. In certain phases of progressive general paralysis the wretched patient beams his enjoyment of life as he tries to say how well he feels.

If the pathology of the epileptic auras were known, probable conjectures might be made regarding the similar, non-epileptic brain storms that need the stimulus of some psychical factor in the form of perception or ideation. Ignorant though we are, this at least is clear: in epilepsy a discharge of nervous energy takes place unexpectedly and without the instigation of a psychical stimulus. The almost endlessly varied forms of epilepsy owe their peculiarities to a special distribution of that discharge. In *grand mal* it is intense and general. The grave motor commotion and the loss of consciousness indicate that the discharge has invaded the motor area of the brain as well as other regions. In psychical epilepsy, on the contrary, only those parts of the nervous system correlated not with motor but with sensory and ideational functions are affected. There is therefore no conspicuous motor effect, but instead

production of conscious phenomena such as hallucinations. The type of hallucination will be visual or auditory according as the discharge affects the visual or the auditory region of the brain. When intense and exquisite emotions are produced, we must think of the nervous disturbance as affecting those parts of the nervous system that are involved in the production of ecstatic states of mind.

The sudden discharge of nervous energy may be understood in two ways. It may be due to an abnormal production of energy in certain parts of the organism which, when it has gained a sufficient tension, breaks the anatomical bounds within which it was confined. Or, the available nervous energy remaining normal, a pathological inciter to discharge may be present which causes at certain times the epileptic or the epileptiform seizure.

It should not be imagined that all the non-epileptic brain storms are rapturous; they are no more frequently so than the epileptic auras. If our instances are all of the ecstatic sort, it is because ecstasy is the subject of this paper. Among nerve storms of another affective quality may be mentioned the pathological fits of anxiety, of fear, and of rage that break out without any, or, at best, with the most insufficient, psychical causes. And, to speak of more ordinary occurrences, there are persons constitutionally disposed to irrational anger, just as there are people constitutionally prone to raptures. There are numerous instances on record of unmotivated attacks of anxiety; this one, for instance: A woman forty-six years old suffered at times from

a feeling of extreme nervousness and agitation, great restless anxiety, with a sense of uncontrollable dread of some unknown impending terror. Physically, the attack was characterized by violent trembling of the whole body, hurried breathing, irregular heart's action, and profuse cold sweating.¹

¹ Ernest Jones, "The Pathology of Morbid Anxiety," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, VI (1911-12), 102.

In his "Study of Anger" Stanley Hall reports the following instance of abnormal rage:

A girl in good health up to 17, had fits of anger with great regularity; about once a month she was violent and lost all self-control. No small vengeance was her desire, no less than a passionate desire to kill the offender. Hatred shown by looks and gestures was intense.¹

That ecstasies entirely or mainly due to the internal, organic factor should, under the conditions sketched above, be taken as divinely caused, is, in the general state of popular knowledge, just what the psychologist would expect.

To the religious moralist the most important information conveyed in the present objective study will probably be found in the consequences following from the type of explanation accepted by the experiencer. Let us take up again for comparison the case of the priest and that of M. E. In both, as a consequence of a nervous discharge due to physiological causes, inexpressibly delightful and "elevating" emotions are produced. But, although the priest uses the expression "transported to heaven," the experience has for him no moral significance; or, to speak more exactly, in so far as he regards it as the prodromal stage of a loathsome disease, the experience, though "heavenly" in sensory quality, is nevertheless repulsive and depressing. M. E., on the contrary, by the divine interpretation he puts upon his ecstasy, is raised to a high level of energy and is inspired to the achievement of noble moral purposes. The value of God, as conveyed to him in the Christian tradition and enriched by his own meditations, becomes actualized: he *feels* the divine love, and he *hears* the call to righteousness. Every prompting and every purpose, regarded as sanctioned by the Christian God, is stimulated to a strangely intense degree by the assumed divine Presence. At the same time a sense of utter safety and of happiness too deep and lofty for words suffuses his being.

¹ *American Journal of Psychology*, X (1898-99), 541. In "A Study of Fears," by the same author, are to be found striking instances of sudden abnormal fears; see *ibid.*, Vol. VIII.